



Boats might be prohibited from discharging waste in Puget Sound

By Christopher Dunagan

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OLYMPIA — A “no-discharge zone,” to be proposed by the Washington Department of Ecology, would prohibit boaters from releasing sewage — treated or untreated — into Puget Sound.

Under current rules, sewage that undergoes treatment in an approved “marine sanitation device” may be discharged in most areas of Puget Sound. But if the no-discharge zone is approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, that practice would end for all recreational and commercial vessels.

Last week, top officials in the state Ecology Department decided to petition the EPA for the designation, according to Amy Jankowiak, an environmental specialist leading the effort for Ecology. A draft petition, which would justify the need for the designation, is expected to be ready for public review by the end of the year, she said.

“We’ve gone through almost two years of doing research and talking with stakeholders,” Jankowiak said. “We’re ready to move forward with a draft petition.”

Under the federal Clean Water Act, states have no authority to regulate sewage from vessels except within no-discharge zones, and the Coast Guard often is busy with other problems, she said. Nationwide, more than 80 no-discharge zones have been approved in 26 states. In Puget Sound, the idea has been discussed for years, but officials never conducted a formal evaluation of the problem.

Now, with new sewage-pumpout facilities constructed over the past few years, it makes sense for all boaters to dispose of their waste in a safer way, Jankowiak said.

It always has been illegal to dump raw sewage within 3 miles of the shore, but federal rules allow discharge following treatment in all areas except no-discharge areas. Treatment is only partially effective, leaving a high level of fecal bacteria, organic solids and toxic chemicals, all of which can create water-quality problems, she said.

One boat releasing treated sewage might not seem like much, Jankowiak said, but boats are a mobile source of pollution. If they discharge wastes near shellfish beds, they might contaminate the shellfish that someone will eat. Sewage-treatment plants and pumpout stations are fixed sources that health authorities can monitor to ensure the safety of shellfish.

Several commercial and recreational boating organizations have been involved in the planning, yet they remain unconvinced of the need to establish a no-discharge zone.

"Recreational boaters want a clean Puget Sound," said Steve Greaves, president of the Recreational Boating Association of Washington, "but it's difficult to see how a no-discharge zone covering all of Puget Sound is going to change anything."

Since dumping raw sewage is already illegal, the discharge of some treated waste seems insignificant, he said. Ecology has been unable to say how much the water quality would be improved if such sources were eliminated.

"We would like to quantify the size of the problem," Greaves said. "Where does this rank compared to all other pollution? Once we know the size of the problem, we might be able to find other ways to handle it. Meanwhile, we'd like to continue to dialogue and come up with a better solution."

Washington residents own more than 47,000 boats over 21 feet, according to Ecology figures. Nearly 700 commercial vessels stay in Puget Sound year-round, based on estimates from 2005. That year, oceangoing ships made nearly 3,000 trips into Puget Sound.

Large cruise ships have agreed voluntarily not to discharge their treated sewage into Puget Sound, but the no-discharge zone would establish a permanent, enforceable rule.

Most commercial vessels are able to hold waste until they leave the inland waterways, Jankowiak said. Some boats might need to install holding tanks. Ecology officials are working to make sure everyone has reasonable access to pumpout facilities.

About 100 public pumpout facilities are located in Puget Sound, along with 13 pumpout boats, according to Ecology figures. That's more than twice the number of pumpouts typically required by the EPA for a no-discharge zone.

A new app for smartphones is being developed to help boaters locate the nearest pumpout facility and provide up-to-date information about whether it is in service.

The no-discharge zone has been listed as a priority action by the Puget Sound Partnership, which is coordinating the restoration of Puget Sound. The agency has identified stormwater as the greatest source of pollution, but steps are being taken to deal with all sources.

Keith Grellner of the Kitsap Public Health District said he pushed hard to get Ecology to consider a no-discharge zone for Puget Sound. The Health District has been recognized as a leader in tracking down pollution from leaking sewer lines, septic systems and stormwater.

"We have come up with lots of ways to do a better job of handling our waste," he said. "It is a poor message to go after everything else but allow vessels to continue to dump their waste."

If the no-discharge zone is approved, it could give Grellner's staff added authority to enforce clean-water laws, he said. While most people do the right thing and some just need information, others are unwilling to change — even when they know they are creating a pollution problem.

"Some people just want to fight you," Grellner said. "It is important to have the tools, so you can get to an endpoint with them."

As proposed, the no discharge zone would include all inland waters south of the Canadian border and east of Dungeness Spit.

According to Jankowiak, people will be able to make comments before the petition is submitted to the EPA. It has not been determined when the zone would go into effect, but it could depend on the construction of additional pumpout facilities.

For information, visit Ecology's website,

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/nonpoint/CleanBoating/nodischargezone.html>.



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